Imelda Marcos loses legal fight to reclaim confiscated jewellery

This article is more than 4 years old
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/14/imelda-marcos-philippines-loses-legal-fight-to-reclaim-confiscated-jewellery

Court rules former first lady of Philippines, who had 1,000 pairs of shoes, illegally got gems including 25-carat pink diamond

Imelda Marcos, wearing jewellery studded with rubies and diamonds, tried to reclaims jewels worth £120,000. Photograph: Jay Directo/AFP/Getty Images

Oliver Holmes *Southeast Asia correspondent*

Tue 14 Feb 2017 11.45 GMT

The former first lady of the Philippines, infamous for acquiring more than 1,000 pairs of shoes while millions languished in poverty, has lost a legal fight to reclaim jewellery confiscated after her dictator husband was ousted.

The country's supreme court ruled that Imelda Marcos illegally acquired the items, including diamond-studded tiaras and an extremely rare 25-carat pink diamond.

The ruling in the case, which relates to items worth $150,000 (£120,000), sets a precedent that could result in $21m worth of Marcos's jewellery being auctioned off by the state.

A diamond-studded piece of jewellery seized by the Filipino government from Imelda Marcos. Photograph: Noel Celis/AFP/Getty Images

The court found that the jewels could not have been bought by Ferdinand Marcos on his government salary of a few thousands dollars. This, the court said, was sufficient to presume they were unlawfully acquired.

President Marcos and his family amassed billions during his 21 years in power. They fled to Hawaii in 1986 when the army and Filipinos turned against him in a bloodless revolution.

When Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos arrived in the US, they brought with them hundreds of pieces of jewellery and a couple of dozen gold bricks, reportedly wedding anniversary presents from Imelda to her husband.

Back in the Philippines, Imelda's shoe collection was displayed at the presidential palace as a symbol of her lavish lifestyle.

A pink diamond seized three decades ago from Imelda Marcos. Photograph: Francis R. Malasig/EPA

Her jewellery collection, now stored at the central bank, includes a golden belt with a diamond buckle, necklaces, brooches, earrings and gems.

Other items, such as 200 artworks including paintings by Van Gogh, Picasso and Rembrandt, remain missing. A government body tasked with finding the "ill-gotten wealth" has traced money through jurisdictions all over the world.

The $10bn question: what happened to the Marcos millions?

Read more

Imelda Marcos returned to Manila in 1991 after her husband died in Honolulu and fought off several corruption cases, including one that could have seen her jailed for up to 50 years.

Previous governments have pledged to sell off the jewellery but Marcos has been persistent, taking the case to the supreme court in 2014.

The Marcos family remains powerful in the Philippines. Imelda, now 87, is serving her third term in the house of representatives and her son, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, narrowly lost the vice-presidential election last year.

The family has found an ally in the country's current president, Rodrigo Duterte, a strongman nicknamed "the Punisher", who took power last year and has overseen a war on drugs that has killed thousands of people.

Duterte also endorsed a controversial movement to give Ferdinand Marcos a hero's burial with military honours last year. His closeness to the Marcos family has cast doubt over whether the plan to auction off the jewellery will go ahead.